

Notes from the Icehouse



Tigers, *The Magic School Bus* and Uncertainty

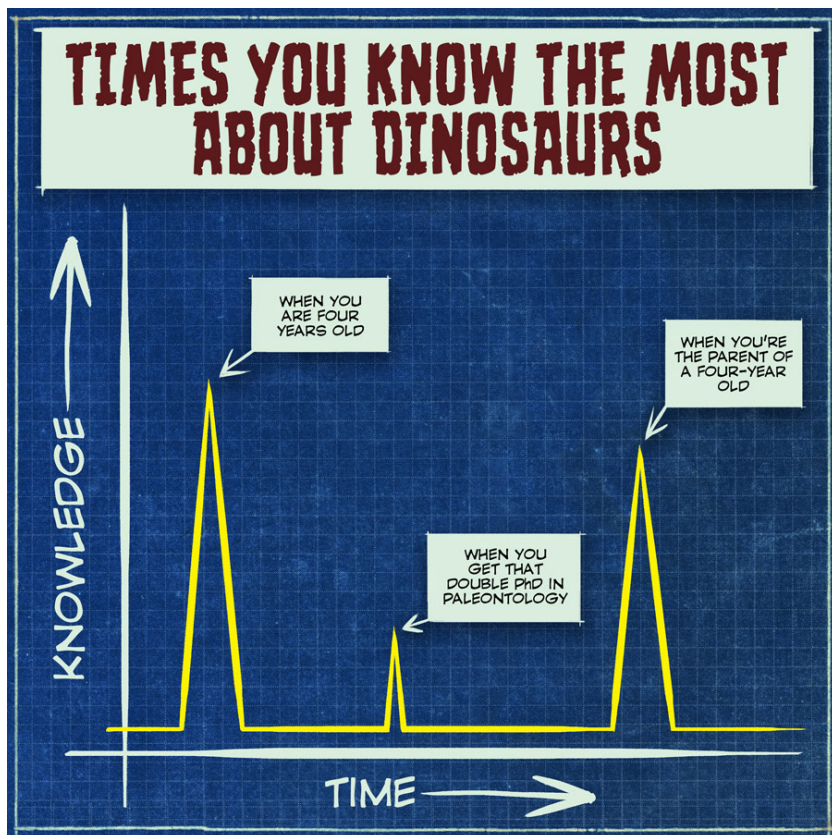
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My son wants to save the tigers.

My son is eight and, for the past three months or so, he has been *very* interested in tigers. A tiger poster hangs over his bed; a small framed print of a tiger sits on his bedside table. He watches videos of tigers, and lions, and cheetahs, on YouTube. He has taken out every book on the big cats available in our two nearest public libraries. He takes notes. (He's in second grade. I can't get my university students to do this.) As a result, he knows that tigers are endangered worldwide; the books he reads all mention this. He can't really comprehend what this means – we haven't explained the sixth extinction, children's books aren't supposed to be dystopian, and he's never even met a tiger – but he's old enough to understand loss, and he's intuited what it would mean to lose something entirely and forever. So, he asked – maybe *because* he doesn't quite grasp the scale of the problem – 'What can I do?'

Figure 1. Children hold a preternatural capacity for detail about the subject of their current obsession: dinosaurs, tigers, etc. Copyright Dave Kellett, 2016, Sheldon Comics, 7 March 2016.



That's not a question for wildlife biologists or environmentalists or the IUCN; that's a question for his parents.¹ We told him he

¹ Full disclosure: I have one child. I am not an expert in parenting, child psychology and development, or early childhood education. As an historian I am charged with finding pattern, disruption and relationship; with drawing larger conclusions from individual details. Here I can only offer conclusions based on one detail, now eight years old.

Figure 2. The newest member of what the World Wildlife Fund calls 'Panda Nation'. He would have preferred Tiger Nation.



could do three things. First, he could learn as much as possible about big cats.

Second, he could talk to other people and teach *them* about tigers (although at this point, I'm not sure how many more facts about big

cats my brain can handle: did you know that every tiger has a unique stripe pattern? That tigers can jump thirty feet in a single bound? That three subspecies have already gone extinct? Such is our dinner table conversation.) Third, he could raise money for conservation organisations to help other people save the tigers. He promptly signed up to raise money for World Wildlife Fund's 'Wear It Wild' Day (3 March), so he could wear his tiger suit to school. Astonishingly, he raised over \$200 in a little over a week.

All these suggestions, of course, were more about assuaging his anxiety by framing achievable, constructive actions than they were about actually 'saving' the Indochinese tiger. These were things he *could* do, that were age-appropriate and safe, and within his scale of influence; they echoed Rene Dubos' mantra to 'think globally, act locally'. They reinforced other lessons that we try to teach (like the value of going to the library, which I *also* can't get my students to do). And they acknowledged some of the most wonderful things about him: his curiosity, willingness to act and capacity for empathy with that which he has not yet seen or may never know.

Still, I've struggled with our response. For one, these suggestions all seemed pretty simplistic, pretty reductionist and not that much different from what I did in high school thirty years ago when we were trying to promote recycling. My son's vocabulary for environmental degradation is more sophisticated than mine was at his age – he understands many of the causes and consequences of habitat loss. But surely we should have come further than 'raising awareness'? More unsettling is the way we frame such actions, the beloved story arc of the determined young hero changing the world one saved allowance at a time. I worry that this reinforces a neoliberal fiction that offloads responsibility for structural change and centuries of historical behavior onto the shoulders of a concerned child. Why should Greta Thunberg have had to walk out of school?

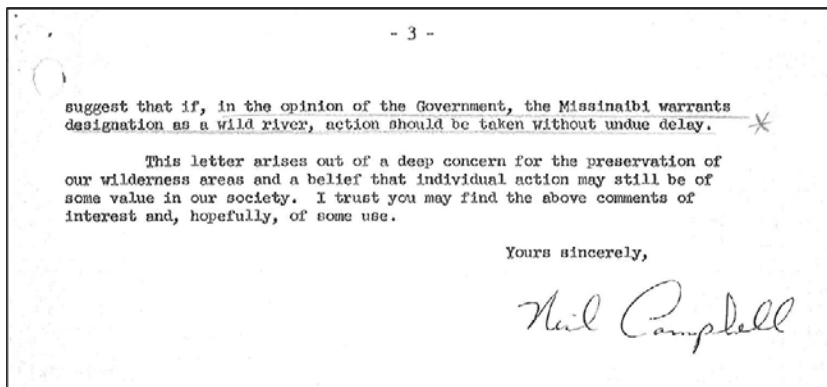
We are parenting in an age of environmental anxiety. We are not the first generation to do so; my parents grew up conscious of everything from nuclear fallout to unconstrained development. But with climate change and species loss, our anxiety is both diffuse and ever-present. When I was growing up in Toronto, Canada in the 1970s

Figure 3. The 'Suzuki Superhero Challenge', 2015–. David Suzuki Foundation.



and 1980s, we learned about acid rain – but that was America’s fault. Pollution generally happened somewhere else. We weren’t really worried about rendering the planet inhabitable. In the summers we could leave the city and go north into cool pine woods where people like us had been seeking refuge for a century. Conservation was more a frugality inherited from my grandmother – a single mother who lived through the Great Depression and the Second World War, and didn’t waste a square inch of aluminium foil – than a practice

Figure 4. Letter from my father to Ontario's Deputy Minister of Lands and Forests in January 1968. The Missinaibi River was designated a provincial park in 1970 and a national heritage river in 2004. I don't think Dad's letter was really what tipped the balance here, but you never know.



explicitly related to a precarious biodiversity. Such was the shield of middle-class privilege in a developed country in the late twentieth-century.

Now, though, that shield seems little more than a set of blinders. There are more and more reports of children anxious about their futures as the planet warms (and, more recently, as the COVID-19 pandemic rages). The rising generation has grown up with safety protocols for hot days, and is now asking the inevitable question: 'Will it be too hot for us to live?' So, we are caught between two precepts of modern parenting. We must be honest: tell your children the truth, as much as they can handle. Truth builds trust. We must also be calm. Children find security in their parents' equilibrium. Daycare staff tell parents not to dramatise morning drop-off; if you make it a big deal, they say, the child will learn it's a big deal. This applies to larger crises, too. (My husband's version of this is: 'Don't make everything the last ten minutes of *Casablanca*.')

Herein lies the dilemma and the angst: how can we acknowledge

Figure 5. December 2016, age 3. Two things I want for him: happiness and four seasons.



the enormous gravity of the climate crisis – or, indeed, that tigers may go extinct – that our children have been born to, but not define their lives by it. How do we prepare children for adulthood, that most fun-

damental responsibility of parenting, without corroding their rights as children: their rights to play, to happiness ... to possibility.

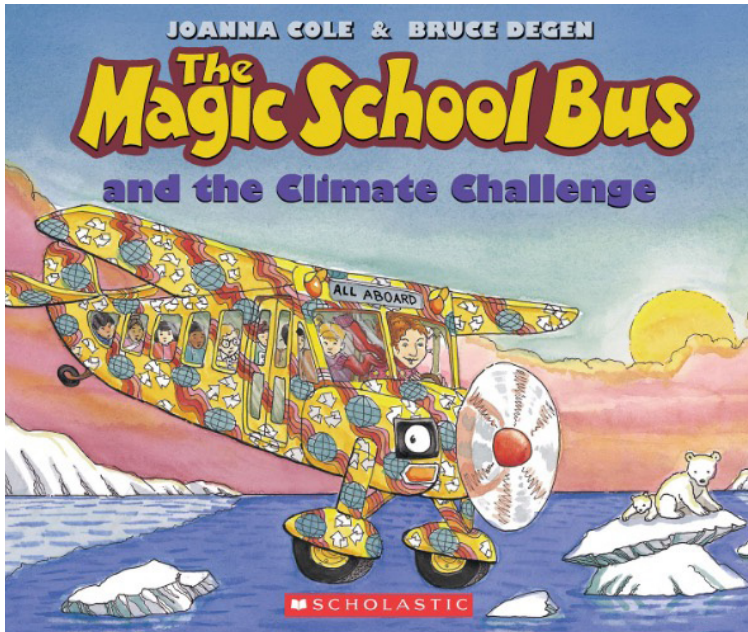
Facing this predicament, rising numbers of people – admittedly, generally urban professionals from the global North – are choosing not to have children, fearing that climate change will render their quality of life markedly less than our own.² David Suzuki wept as he held his infant grandchildren, not with joy but at the prospect of their reduced futures.³ Social historians will point out that this is not entirely new – people have often delayed or foregone child-bearing in times of insecurity. But these decisions turned on immediate economic circumstances (delaying marriage until the harvest rebounds, the depression ends) and ebbed and flowed with material capacity. What if that capacity is biophysical, and cannot recover?

It isn't that children can't confront difficult subjects. There is at least a half-century of popular media – paralleling the modern environmental movement – featuring storylines of environmental catastrophe and intervention, from *The Lorax* to *Moana*. These can be surprisingly pointed; when Doc McStuffins enlarges her hospital for toys and stuffed animals, she discovers the hospital now uses too much energy and is melting the Toyarctic. That's not an allegory, that's the later twentieth century in microcosm. At the same time, *because* the problems are named and dire, books and movies about environmental problems end happily, however improbably; as for example in Dan Gutman's *Mr. Corbett is in Orbit!*, where Mr. Corbett returns from outer space with a giant beach umbrella, to block the sun's rays from reaching Earth. (To be fair, that's entirely in keeping with the attitude that geo-engineering is sufficient to mitigate climate change.) Diagnoses of impending environmental calamities are almost invariably scientific, and proffered solutions are nearly always highly technological or dependent on guilt-triggered individual actions.

² Emma Green, 'A world without children', *The Atlantic*, 20 Sept. 2021; Alex Williams, 'To breed or not to breed', *New York Times*, 20 Nov. 2021

³ Raina Delisle, 'David Suzuki on 60 years of *The Nature of Things*: "I'm more determined than ever"', *The Narwhal*, 6 Nov. 2020 <https://thenarwhal.ca/david-suzuki-the-nature-of-things/>

Figure 6. Part of the wildly popular series by Joanna Cole, this appeared in 2010, promising to ‘make the science easy to understand and fun to learn. This team brings a new, improved understanding to climate change, engaging kids and empowering all’.



As a humanist, I bristle at the easy omission of the historical gaze – and questions of scale, causality, record – and how all of this truncates our understanding of ecological health. The Brundtland Commission is not the origin of environmental anxiety or response, even if for my students it is now literally before their time. We need to acknowledge two simultaneous historical velocities: the longer genealogy of human impact and the real-time experience of our children. They are living a shifting baseline, observing significant environmental changes even within their childhoods. While Millennials and Generation X grew up with domestic legislation and international treaties on atmospheric pollution and sustainable development, the

current ‘Gen Z’ speaks about climate change in a way that no other generation has. It is the frightening difference between stories that promise and deliver restoration, and the view from childhood, projecting a life course onto a developing and open-ended catastrophe.

In the face of this, we environmental scholars often resort to the *Magic School Bus* approach in our teaching. We build course outlines that end with ‘But here’s what you can do!’, in hope of empowering our students, and to avoid leaving them – and us – in a state of despair and exhaustion. I finish a course on the Anthropocene, for example, by documenting environmental concerns and actions over the past two centuries:

But it is certain that man has done much to mould the form of the earth’s surface ... and every new fact, illustrative of the action and reaction between humanity and the material world around it, is another step toward the determination of the great question, whether man is of nature or above her.

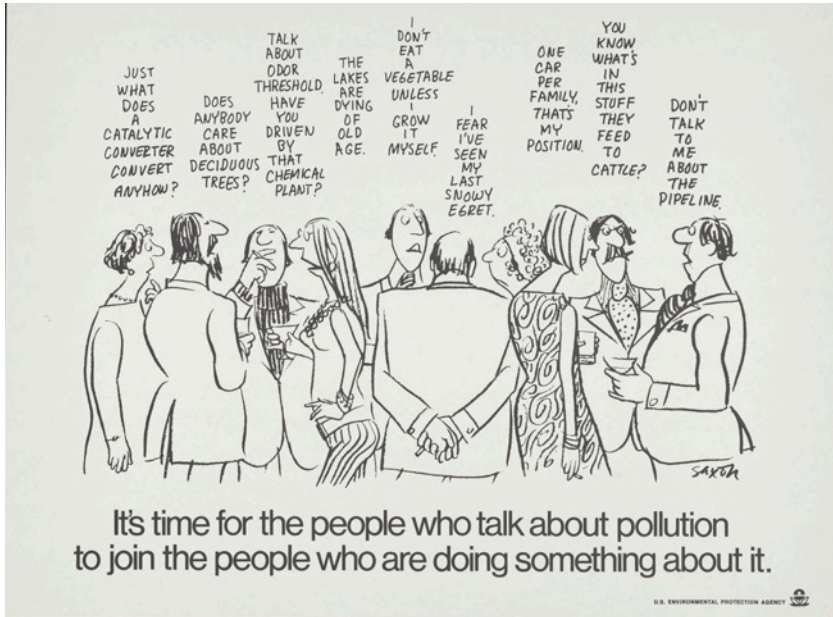
- George Perkins Marsh, 1864⁴

The intention here is three-fold. First, to complicate, albeit with more annoyance than effectiveness, the relentlessly presentist, scientific, short-term and inoffensive actions that our students generally associate with ‘sustainability’. My aim is to draw in a humanistic constellation of concerns, about choices and beliefs, wellbeing and equity, that encircles the data of carbon accounting and composting. Second, to offer some reassurance that these problems are not entirely a surprise, unfamiliar, or a burden for this generation alone.⁵ As Graeme Wynn observes, taking the long view, environmentalism

⁴ George Marsh, Address to the Agricultural Society of Rutland County, 30 September 1847; George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature: Or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (1864); Graeme Wynn, ‘Travels with George Perkins Marsh: Notes on a journey into environmental history’, in Alan MacEachern and William J. Turkel (eds), *Method and Meaning in Canadian Environmental History* (Toronto: Nelson, 2009) pp. 2–23.

⁵ Marguerite Schaffer, “‘Give Earth a chance’: Earth Day and the politics of modern environmentalism”, *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective* 13 (8) (2020), <http://origins.osu.edu/article/earth-day-50-environmentalism-thunberg-and-epa>

Figure 7. Charles Saxon for the Environmental Protection Agency, ca. 1960. Library of Congress. This shows students that people have been talking – and doing something – about these questions for a half-century, for better or worse.



‘remains a work in progress, a commitment that demands constant attention, a job not yet done’.⁶

And finally, to demonstrate that individuals can put a spoke in the wheel of History, and that opportunities to do so have widened. The conversation has become more self-aware, more inclusive and more pointed; I can't picture John Muir telling Gifford Pinchot, ‘Blah blah blah’, however much he may have wanted to. Yet is this not another sign of ‘The Anthropocene’ – the epoch marked by hu-

⁶ Graeme Wynn, ‘Finding hope: Environmentalism and the Anthropocene’, *Historical Geography* 48 (2020), 7.

mans – this intellectual conceit, that we can save the planet as much as we have endangered it. Environmentalism has, traditionally, required a remarkable sense of human agency, or self-importance.⁷

Even more distressingly, we are teaching students about ourselves, and their parents, and grandparents – generations which have failed, in many ways. We find ourselves imploring our students, unfairly, to solve the problems we have given them.

The world of air and water and soil supports not only the hundreds of thousands of species of animals and plants, it supports man himself. In the past we have often chosen to ignore this fact. Now we are receiving sharp reminders that our heedless and destructive acts enter into the vast cycles of the earth and in time return to bring hazard to ourselves. The problem you have chosen to explore is one that *must be resolved in our time*.

Rachel Carson, 1963⁸

It has not been. And so my child is trying to save the tigers.

The anxiety is his. The angst is mine.

⁷ Frank Zelko, ‘Seeing like a God: Environmentalism in the Anthropocene’, in Mark D. Hersey and Ted Steinberg (eds), *A Field on Fire: The Future of Environmental History* (University of Alabama Press, 2019), pp. 40–56.

⁸ Emphasis added. Rachel Carson, ‘Environmental hazards: Control of pesticides and other chemical poisons’, Statement Before the Subcommittee on Reorganization and International Organizations of the Committee on Government Operations, 4 June 1963.